A Concept of Conflict management and Methods of Conflict Resolution

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ABSTRACT

Already in the sphere of the everyday language the term conflict has no positive intonation. Usually dysfunctional phenomenon like discord, dispute or fighting is associated with it. Taken always in the negative sense it also contributes significantly to the organisational growth and development. Present paper is about the concept of conflict and the major issues arising conflicts in the organisations. Also the techniques to resolve the conflicts and suggestions to prevent/ manage them are also given.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict occurs between people in all kinds of human relationships and in all social settings. Because of the wide range of potential differences among people, the absence of conflict usually signals the absence of meaningful interaction. Conflict by itself is neither good nor bad. However, the manner in which conflict is handled determines whether it is constructive or destructive (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000).

Conflict is defined as an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings toward each other (Fisher, 1990). The incompatibility or difference may exist in reality or may only be perceived by the parties involved. Nonetheless, the opposing actions and the hostile emotions are very real hallmarks of human conflict.

Conflict has the potential for either a great deal of destruction or much creativity and positive social change (Kriesberg, 1998). Therefore, it is essential to understand the basic processes of conflict so that we can work to maximize productive outcomes and minimize destructive ones. This paper will briefly describe some common sources of conflict, the levels of social interaction at which conflict occurs, and the general strategies of approaching conflict that are available.

Conflict management involves implementing strategies to limit the negative aspects of conflict and to increase the positive aspects of conflict at a level equal to or higher than where the conflict is taking place. Furthermore, the aim of conflict management is to enhance learning and group outcomes (effectiveness or performance in organizational setting) (Rahim, 2002, p. 208). It is not concerned with eliminating all conflict or avoiding conflict. Conflict can be valuable to groups and organizations. It has been shown to increase group outcomes when managed properly (e.g. Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 2000; Bodtker & Jameson, 2001; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Khun & Poole, 2000; De Church & Marks, 2001)

SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Early reviews in the field of conflict resolution identified a large number of schemes for describing sources or types of conflict (Fink, 1968; Mack & Snyder, 1958). One of the early theorists on conflict, Daniel Katz (1965), created a typology that distinguishes three main sources of conflict: economic, value, and power.

1. **Economic conflict** involves competing motives to attain scarce resources. Each party wants to get the most that it can, and the behavior and emotions of each party are directed toward maximizing its gain. Union and management conflict often has as one of its sources the incompatible goals of how to slice up the "economic pie".

2. Value conflict involves incompatibility in ways of life, ideologies – the preferences, principles and practices that people believe in. International conflict (e.g., the Cold War) often has a strong value component, wherein each side asserts the rightness and superiority of its way of life and its political-economic system.

3. Power conflict occurs when each party wishes to maintain or maximize the amount of influence that it exerts in the relationship and the social setting. It is impossible for one party to be stronger without the other being weaker, at least in terms of direct influence over each other. Thus, a power struggle ensues which usually ends in a victory and defeat, or in a "stand-off" with a continuing state of tension. Power conflicts can occur between individuals, between groups or between nations, whenever one or both parties choose to take a power approach to the relationship. Power also enters into all conflict since the parties are attempting to control each other.

It must be noted that most conflicts are not of a pure type, but involve a mixture of sources. For example, union-management conflict typically involves economic competition, but may also take the form of a power struggle and often involves different ideologies or political values. The more sources that are involved, the more intense and intractable the conflict usually is.

Another important source of conflict is ineffective communication. Miscommunication and misunderstanding can create conflict even where there are no basic incompatibilities. In addition, parties may have different perceptions as to what are the facts in a situation, and until they share information and clarify their perceptions, resolution is impossible. Self-centeredness, selective perception, emotional bias, prejudices, etc., are all forces that lead us to perceive situations very differently from the other party. Lack of skill in communicating what really mean in a clear and respectful fashion often results in confusion, hurt and anger, simply feed the conflict process. Whether the conflict has objective sources or is due only to perceptual or communication problems, it is experienced as very real by the parties involved.

Escalation of Conflict:

A final source of conflict is more additional than basic, that is, it comes in after the conflict has started. Conflicts have a definite tendency to escalate, i.e., to become more intense and hostile, and to develop more issues, i.e., what the parties say the conflict is about. Therefore, escalating conflicts become more difficult to manage. The process of escalation feeds on fear and defensiveness.

Threat leads to counter threat, usually with higher stakes at each go-round. Selective and distorted perception justifies a competitive and cautious approach as opposed to a trusting and cooperative one. Through Deutsch's crude law of social relations (1973), competition breeds competition, rather than cooperation. The self-fulfilling prophecy comes into play. Each party believes in the evil intentions of the other and the inevitability of disagreement, and therefore takes precautionary actions which signal mistrust and competitiveness (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964). When the other party then responds with a counteraction, this is perceived as justifying the initial precautionary measure, and a new spiral of action and counteraction begins. Through the norm of reciprocity, stronger attempts to control are met not only with stronger resistance, but more contentious attempts to gain the upper hand.

With each succeeding spiral of conflict, polarization grows and the parties become more adamant and intransigent in their approach to the situation. Even though the intensity of the conflict may moderate for periods of time, the issues remain, and a triggering event induces conflictual behavior with negative consequences, and the conflict has moved one more step up the escalation staircase. When parties become "locked in" to a conflict they are usually unable to get out by themselves, and the intervention of a third party in the role of arbitrator, mediator or consultant may be required (Fisher, 1972, 1997).

LEVELS OF CONFLICT

Conflict can occur at a number of levels of human functioning. Conflict in your head between opposing motives or ideas is shown by your "internal dialogue" and is at the intrapersonal level. Beyond that, the primary concern here is with social conflict, i.e., conflict between people whether they are acting as individuals, as members of groups, or as representatives of organizations or nations.

Interpersonal conflict occurs when two people have incompatible needs, goals, or approaches in their relationship. Communication breakdown is often an important source of interpersonal conflict and learning communication skills is valuable in preventing and resolving such difficulties. At the same time, very real differences occur between people that cannot be resolved by any amount of improved communication. "Personality conflict" refers to very strong differences in motives, values or styles in dealing with people that are not resolvable. For example, if both parties in a relationship have a high need for power and both want to be dominant in the relationship, there is no way for both to be satisfied, and a power struggle ensues. Common tactics used in interpersonal power struggles include the exaggerated use of rewards and punishments, deception and evasion, threats and emotional blackmail, and flattery or ingratiation. Unresolved power conflict usually recycles and escalates to the point of relationship breakdown and termination.

Role conflict involves very real differences in role definitions, expectations or responsibilities between individuals who are interdependent in a social system. If there are ambiguities in role definitions in an organization or unclear boundaries of responsibilities, then the stage is set for interpersonal friction between the persons involved. Unfortunately, the conflict is often misdiagnosed as interpersonal conflict rather than role conflict, and resolution is then complicated and misdirected. The emotional intensity is often quite high in role conflict since people are directly involved as individuals and there is a strong tendency to personalize the conflict.

Intergroup conflict occurs between collections of people such as ethnic or racial groups, departments or levels of decision making in the same organization, and union and management. Competition for scarce resources is a common source of intergroup conflict, and societies have developed numerous regulatory mechanisms, such as collective bargaining and mediation, for dealing with intergroup conflict in less disruptive ways. Social-psychological processes are very important in intergroup conflict (Fisher, 1990). Group members tend to develop stereotypes (oversimplified negative beliefs) of the opposing group, tend to blame them for their own problems (scapegoating), and practice discrimination against them. These classic symptoms of intergroup conflict can be just as evident in organizations as in race relations in community settings. Intergroup conflict is especially tense and prone to escalation and intractability when group identities are threatened. The costs of destructive intergroup conflict can be extremely high for a society in both economic and social terms.

Multi-Party Conflict occurs in societies when different interest groups and organizations have varying priorities over resource management and policy development. These complex conflicts typically involve a combination of economic, value and power sources. This complexity is often beyond the reach of traditional authoritative or adversarial procedures, and more collaborative approaches to building consensus are required for resolution (Cormick et al, 1996; Gray, 1989).

International conflict occurs between states at the global level. Competition for resources certainly plays a part, but value and power conflict are often intertwined and sometimes predominate. The differences are articulated through the channels of diplomacy in a constant game of give and take, or threat and counter threat, sometimes for the highest of stakes. Mechanisms of propaganda can lead to many of the same social-psychological distortions that characterize interpersonal and intergroup conflict.

METHODS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Regardless of the level of conflict, there are differing approaches to deal with the incompatibilities that exist. Conflict can result in destructive outcomes or creative ones depending on the approach that is taken. If we can manage conflict creatively, we can often find new solutions that are mutually satisfactory to both parties. Sometimes this will involve a distribution of resources or power that is more equitable than before, or in creating a larger pool of resources or forms of influence than before. Creative outcomes are more probable when the parties are interdependent, i.e., each having some degree of independence and autonomy from which to influence the other, rather than one party being primarily dependent on the other. Given interdependence, three general strategies have been identified that the parties may take toward dealing with their conflict; win-lose, lose-lose, and win-win (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964).

The **win-lose approach** is all too common. People learn the behaviors of destructive conflict relationships from the family to the school playground. The "fixed pie" assumption is made, often incorrectly, that what one party gains, the other loses. The strategy is thus to force the other side to capitulate. Sometimes, this is done through socially acceptable mechanisms such as majority vote, the authority of the leader, or the determination of a judge. Sometimes, it involves secret strategies, threat, innuendo – whatever works is acceptable, i.e., the ends justify the means. There is often a strong we-they distinction accompanied by the classic symptoms of intergroup conflict. The valued outcome is to have a victor who is superior, and a vanquished who withdraws in shame, but who prepares very carefully for the next round. In the long run, everyone loses.

The **lose-lose strategy** is exemplified by smoothing over conflict or by reaching the simplest of compromises. In neither case is the creative potential of productive conflict resolution realized or explored. Disagreement is seen as inevitable, so therefore why not split the difference or smooth over difficulties in as painless a way as possible? Sometimes, this is indeed the reality of the situation, and the costs are less than in the win-lose approach, at least for the loser. Each party gets some of what it wants, and resigns itself to partial satisfaction. Neither side is aware that by confronting the conflict fully and cooperatively they might have created a more satisfying solution. Or the parties may realistically use this approach to divide limited resources or to forestall a win-lose escalation and outcome.

The **win-win approach** is a conscious and systematic attempt to maximize the goals of both parties through collaborative problem solving. The conflict is seen as a problem to be solved rather than a war to be won. The important distinction is

we (both parties) versus the problem, rather than we (one party) versus them (the other party). This method focuses on the needs and constraints of both parties rather than emphasizing strategies designed to conquer. Full problem definition and analysis and development of alternatives precedes consensus decisions on mutually agreeable solutions. The parties work toward common and superordinate goals, i.e., ones that can only be attained by both parties pulling together. There is an emphasis on the quality of the long term relationships between the parties, rather than short term accommodations. Communication is open and direct rather than secretive and calculating. Threat and coercion are proscribed. The assumption is made that integrative agreements are possible given the full range of resources existing in the relationship. Attitudes and behaviors are directed toward an increase of trust and acceptance rather than an escalation of suspicion and hostility. The win-win approach requires a very high degree of patience and skill in human relations and problem solving.

How to manage conflict

Overall conflict management should aim to minimize affective conflicts at all levels, attain and maintain a moderate amount of substantive conflict, and use the appropriate conflict management strategy--to effectively bring about the first two goals, and also to match the status and concerns of the two parties in conflict (Rahim, 2002).In order for conflict management strategies to be effective, they should satisfy certain criteria. The below criteria are particularly useful for not only conflict management, but also decision making in management.

General Suggestions from Rahim's Criteria for Conflict Management (2002)

- Organization Learning and Effectiveness- In order to attain this objective, conflict management strategies should be designed to enhance critical and innovative thinking to learn the process of diagnosis and intervention in the right problems.
- Needs of Stakeholders- Sometimes multiple parties are involved in a conflict in an organization and the challenge of conflict management would be to involve these parties in a problem solving process that will lead to collective learning and organizational effectiveness. Organizations should institutionalize the positions of employee advocate, customer and supplier advocate, as well as environmental and stockholder advocates.
- Ethics - A wise leader must behave ethically, and to do so the leader should be open to new information and be willing to change his or her mind. By the same token subordinates and other stakeholders have an ethical duty to speak out against the decisions of supervisors when consequences of these decisions are likely to be serious. "Without an understanding of ethics, conflict cannot be handled" (Batcheldor, 2000).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conflict is an inevitable fact of human existence. If we work to understand and manage it effectively, we can improve both the satisfaction and productivity of our social relationships. Do not avoid the conflict, hoping it will go away. Ask the participants to describe specific actions they would like the other party to take. It would also be beneficial to have a third party (meaning a non-direct superior with access to the situation) involved. This could be an individual member or a board dedicated to resolving and preventing issues. Lastly, do not meet separately with people in conflict. If you allow each individual to tell their story to you, you risk polarizing their positions.

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